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Color Me Calm: Adult Coloring and the University Library

Abstract

An activity often reserved for children, coloring books for adults rose from hipster trend to global phenomenon beginning in 2013. Adults flocked to the activity for a variety of reasons, including stress relief, socialization, a way to unplug from technology or even as a way to gain social status by appearing trendy. Participants reported enjoying the tactile, interactive nature of the books as a respite from constant screen time. Coloring books became big business for craft suppliers and bookstores by 2015. Coloring books shot to the top of the Best Sellers list on Amazon and were prominently displayed in book and craft stores. Titles with colorful mandalas, abstract designs, flora and fauna, fantasy characters, and intricate patterns took over prominent endcap and best-seller displays. Librarians responded enthusiastically to the adult coloring trend by offering programming that attracts a wide age range of patrons. Public libraries across the United States started offering monthly coloring programs and some even hosted coloring clubs that meet regularly. In early summer 2015, a local newspaper reported on adults in the Omaha-metro area joining in on the coloring fun. While a student coloring club formed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the fall, no such organization existed the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). Capitalizing on the growing adult coloring trend and local interest, Criss Library held several events entitled “Color Me Calm” during the 2015-2016 academic year, both independently and during an campus-wide event known as “De-Stress Fest.” A brief history of the adult coloring trend, the organization, and assessment of the events are shared as well as campus partnerships that were formed and recommendations for future events.

Keywords

university, library, academic library, higher education, adult coloring, outreach

Introduction

Attending a college or university today places an unprecedented amount of stress on students as they juggle employment and coursework on top of social and family lives, which can ultimately affect their mental health (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Mounsey, Vandehey, & Diekoff, 2013, Palmer et al., 2014). With an aggressive job market and increasing tuition costs, many students take on internships or part- or full-time jobs to pay bills (Barber & Levitan, 2015). Traditional students are involved in a variety of Greek organizations, professional associations, and student clubs to foster a competitive edge for their résumés (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). Returning students have the additional stress of family schedules to manage (Kohler, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009) and first-generation students are wading into higher education often with limited parental guidance (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Coloring for adults has quickly become a popular way to take a small break from fast-paced daily lives. The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Criss Library saw a perfect opportunity to capitalize on this trend by offering coloring programming to help students and faculty alleviate some stress during critical points in the academic year. This paper will provide a brief history of the adult coloring trend as well as a discussion of organizing the events in the library, outcomes and future directions for coloring programming.

Coloring for Adults

Although it is an activity often reserved for children, coloring books for adults rose from hipster trend to global phenomenon beginning in 2013 (McAfee, 2015; Zamon, 2015). Adults flock to the activity for a variety of reasons, including stress relief (Kircher, 2015, Bender, 2015), socialization (Kuperkinsky, 2015), as a way to unplug from technology (Naire, 2015) or even as a way to increase social status by appearing trendy (Bennett, 2015; Eglash, 2015). Participants report enjoying the tactile, interactive nature of the coloring books as a respite from constant screen time (Marcotte, 2015).

Coloring books became big business for craft suppliers and bookstores by 2015 (Flood, 2015). For example, between 2013 and 2015, the mega-hit *Secret Garden* sold more than 5 million copies in 22 languages, making the 96-page collection of black-and-white ink drawings a global best seller (Raphel, 2015). Coloring books shot to the top of the Best Sellers list on Amazon (Kokalitcheva, 2015) and were prominently displayed in book and craft stores (Hagerty & Trachtenberg, 2015). Titles with colorful mandalas, abstract designs, flora and fauna, fantasy characters and intricate patterns took over prominent endcap and best-seller displays. Librarians responded enthusiastically to the adult coloring trend by offering programming that often attracts a wide age range of patrons, some even bringing their own books and materials (Fialkoff, 2015). Public libraries across the United States starting offering monthly coloring programs (Futch, 2015;

Harris, 2014; Bella Vista, 2015) and some even hosted coloring clubs that meet regularly (Marcotte, 2015). Nearby, Gretna Public Library held a Grown-up Coloring Club event in January 2016 just outside our own Omaha-metro area (Skinner, 2016).

Social media fuelled the trend when fans began posting their elaborate creations on Facebook and Pinterest (Raphel, 2015, Kuperkinsky, 2015). As their popularity grew, celebrities such as Zooey Deschanel (Flood, 2015), Alicia Keys (Mondry, 2015) and Kim Ki-Bum (Alter, 2015) joined the craze and even Martha's Vineyard offered coloring opportunities for its elite vacationers (McAllister, 2016). Mondelez International offered black-and-white packages of Oreo cookies that could be colored in online and shipped or blank packs that came with markers to color at home (Nudd, 2015). Popular culture coloring books soon appeared featuring *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones*, *Doctor Who*, *Harry Potter*, *Sherlock*, *Mad Men*, *Grumpy Cat* and several editions with swear words in fanciful designs (Amazon, 2016). Even mega-store IKEA launched five free pages online for budding interior designers (Whitbrook, 2016). Eventually, themed coloring events starting appearing, such as "Star Wars" (Bridgewater, 2016), "Color between the Wines" (Arnold, 2016, January 24) and The Hopping Gnome Taproom's "Coloring and Beer" (Arnold, 2016, January 29). The popular website Meetup.com became a connecting point for coloring enthusiasts (Adult Coloring, 2016).

Capitalizing on the craze, news outlets and popular media claimed coloring offered stress relief and tranquility for under \$20 (Eglash, 2015; Painter, 2015; Monson, 2015; Gilan, 2015; Frank, 2015; Berl, 2015; Williams, 2015; Cift, 2015; Bromwich, 2014; Ratliff, 2015). For those unwilling to commit to purchasing colored pencils, markers, and coloring books (Starr, 2015), a multitude of coloring apps came on the market (Dredge, 2015; Van Grove, 2015, Grant, 2015) much to the dismay of diehard colorists who claimed apps "missed the point" of using physical supplies (Vagino, 2015).

However, many therapists are quick to point out coloring books were not in the traditional arsenal of techniques for art therapy and should not be labeled as such (Schwedel, 2015; Malchiodi, 2015). To date, there have been no empirical studies offering evidence of health benefits from using coloring books, despite the media quoting several art therapy studies (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Drake & Winner, 2012; Dovy, 2015). Malchiodi (2015) wrote a scathing review reminding the public that art therapy was about truly creating something as a means of expression under the guidance of a licensed therapist, and going so far as to state the daily need to color could "actually lean toward obsession" (para. 5). The American Art Therapy Association even released a statement that it "supports the use of coloring books for pleasure and self-care, however these uses should not be confused with the delivery of professional art therapy services, during which a client engages with a credentialed art therapist" (Carolan & Betts, 2015, para. 1).

Criss Library

The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) is Nebraska's only metropolitan university and is classified as a Carnegie Doctoral/Research University (DRU). The student body is comprised of approximately 12,400 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students, with 2,061 international students and 1,479 military and veteran students. Approximately 50% of UNO's students are first-generation college attendees and, overall, UNO students work off campus to a greater extent than their counterparts at peer institutions do. This raises additional hurdles when hosting student events on campus; a majority is not on campus every day or may take night classes. Scheduling and attendance at programs is something that all libraries face and UNO Criss Library is no exception.

Midterm Stress Relief 2015

In early summer 2015, a local newspaper reported on adults in the Omaha-metro area joining in on the coloring fun (Logan, 2015). While a student coloring club formed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the fall (Adult coloring, 2015), no such organization existed at UNO. Capitalizing on the growing trend and local interest, Criss Library held an event entitled "Color Me Calm" during the last week of October 2015. The event coincided with midterms, during which time no campus events are officially coordinated during this time to address stress. A one-day, 8-hour event was held in the lobby adjacent to the main gate to promote stress relief. We purchased Sharpie markers and gel pens and borrowed colored pencils from the UNO Kaneko Library. We primarily used Pinterest to find copyright-free coloring pages from artists willing to share their work and saved a variety of abstract, inspirational, holiday, sports, and mandala designs to a shared online folder accessible by the entire staff. This made it easy for anyone working at the event to print additional copies of all the designs when supplies ran low. We created a sign-up page on the all-staff wiki encouraging staff from all departments to participate in working the table.

The event was advertised on Facebook, Twitter, the campus daily (faculty/staff) and weekly (student) email newsletters and through table tents spread throughout the library's study areas. A mobile flat-screen TV cart at the entrance of the library directed participants to the adjacent lobby where three tables (seating four each) were set up near a welcome table that had a variety of coloring sheets and glitter glue pens. Each of the three tables had a 24-set package of colored pencils, a 24-set of colored Sharpie markers, and recycled copier paper so the markers would not bleed through the coloring sheet onto the table. From 8am-5pm, one or two staff members staffed the table to welcome students to the area, direct them to the tables, and ensure that there were plenty of coloring sheets available in different designs. The heaviest periods of use were 12-1pm and 4-5pm, as noted by

a tally sheet kept at the welcome table, with 63 total participants. We tracked the number of participants through a headcount, rather than the number of coloring sheets taken, as some enthusiastic patrons took more than one.

De-Stress Fest 2015

Due to the continued popularity of coloring and the attendance at the Color Me Calm event in October, we planned a second event to coincide with final exams. As before, we held a one-day, 8-hour event in the lobby. Library staff operated a welcome table to monitor supplies and greet participants. However, the event was held from 10am-8pm to reflect a) statistics gathered during the last event showed which higher attendance after 10am and b) students frequenting the library at later hours at the end of the semester.

During the week before Finals Week, an event known as “De-Stress Fest” is held in partnership multiple departments and groups across the UNO campus, including the Academic and Career Development Center, Civic and Social Responsibility, Maverick Productions, Student Involvement, Student Government, UNO Bookstore, and Wellness Subdivision. A wide variety of activities like tailgating, Play-Doh sculpting, late night breakfasts, and resume help are held throughout the week, with multiple events each day. Criss Library has intermittently participated in this week of activities by hosting space for ZUMBA and yoga, offering a meditation room with tea, and “puppy therapy.” Collaborating with these organizations to put Color Me Calm on the official list of activities provided built-in marketing opportunities since the Office of Student Activities displays posters, mails post-cards, monitors multiple social media outlets, and sends out daily/weekly newsletter emails. Criss Library sees a heavy volume of traffic at the end of the semester and having a dedicated marketing team in Student Activities freed up our time to help patrons at the reference desk, rather than concentrating on marketing our event by ourselves.

In addition to our partnership with the De-Stress Fest departments, the Thompson Learning Community (TLC) contacted the library about having a sign-in sheet available for their students. The TLC is a learning community that provides support to students with a Susan T. Buffet Foundation scholarship and aims to make the transition to college, and the entry into a major field of study, as smooth and educationally rewarding as possible. We agreed to provide a sign-in sheet to track student participation with the understanding we would neither check IDs nor monitor students to ensure they stayed and participated.

As before, a mobile flat-screen TV cart at the entrance of the library directed participants to the adjacent lobby where five tables (seating four each) were set up near a welcome table that had a variety of coloring sheets and glitter glue pens. Each of the tables had a 24-set package of colored pencils, a 24-set of colored Sharpie markers, and recycled copier paper. The heaviest periods of use during De-

Stress Fest were 12-2pm and 5-7pm with 110 total participants, with 18 Thompson Learning Academy students. We agreed the program was a success and implemented it again in the spring.

Midterm Stress Relief 2016

The “Color Me Calm” event in spring 2016 was held from 10am to 7pm and the same supplies, staffing, marketing, and location were used as during the fall event. In addition to the variety of previously saved designs, we also included designs from the U.S. Patent Office, Smithsonian Museums and an architectural print from our own Criss Library Archives and Special Collections. The heaviest traffic times were 11am-12pm and 1-2pm, with 83 participants. Although it was a slight decline from the number of participants in De-Stress Fest 2015, it was an increase from the original “Color Me Calm” event held in the fall. The lower turnout showed we still did not have the strength of the marketing efforts that came from collaborating with various departments for a campus-wide event. However, it is clear that adult coloring was still popular through the increase in participants with the same amount of marketing used in the fall.

Discussion/Conclusion

With the success of the first three Color Me Calm events, adult coloring has become a staple at Criss Library. While not accepted by the medical profession as a prescribed method to reduce stress, students seemed to leave a little bit happier. Participants at all of the events preferred to congregate over natural breaks in the day (particularly near mealtimes) so Criss Library will plan future events to coincide with these times. Additionally, we found patrons (particularly international students) still wanted instructions and guidance despite the passive nature of the programming. They were uncertain of how many coloring sheets they were allowed to collect, where to sit, and if they had to pay to participate. Welcoming and encouraging librarians seated nearby alleviated these concerns and provided guidance. This set-up not only encouraged more patrons to participate but also created a positive connection between visiting the library and interacting with a librarian. This could serve to alleviate anxiety about contacting a librarian for research needs in the future. Collaborating with other departments strengthened awareness about Criss Library through the De-Stress Fest marketing efforts aimed at students and the planning efforts with other staff members outside of the library. These interactions paint Criss Library as both a welcoming space for patrons of all backgrounds to gather to relax and as an entity committed to the well-being of the campus community.

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